



HARFORD COUNTY HEALTH DEPARTMENT

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Frequently Asked Questions about Seasonal Flu Vaccination 2010-2011

Why should I get a flu vaccination?

Influenza is a serious disease that can lead to hospitalization and sometimes even death. The seasonal flu vaccine is the best way to reduce the chances that you will get the seasonal flu and lessen the chance that you will spread it to others. When more people get vaccinated against the flu, less flu can spread through the community.

What kind of flu vaccines are there?

There are two types of influenza vaccines that protect against seasonal flu. The "flu shot" is an inactivated vaccine (contains killed virus) that is given with a needle, usually in the arm. The flu shot is approved for use among people 6 months of age or older. The flu shot can be given to healthy people and people with chronic medical conditions (asthma, diabetes, or heart disease).

The second type of influenza vaccine is called the nasal-spray flu vaccine. The nasal-spray flu vaccine contains attenuated (weakened) live virus that is administered by a nasal sprayer. It can be given to people age 2 - 49 years of age who are not pregnant and who are healthy with NO chronic medical conditions.

Each year the World Health Organization decides on which three viruses to include in the yearly seasonal flu vaccine. The seasonal flu vaccine for this year protects against the 2009 H1N1 virus and two other viruses (an H3N2 and an influenza B virus).

How do flu vaccines work?

Flu vaccines (the flu shot and the nasal-spray flu vaccine) cause antibodies to develop in the body. These antibodies provide protection against infection with the viruses that are in the vaccine. It takes about two weeks for the antibodies to develop. In the meantime, you are still at risk for getting the flu.

When should I get a seasonal flu vaccination?

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recommend that people get their seasonal flu vaccination as soon as the vaccine is available. Flu vaccination provides protection against the influenza strains contained in the seasonal vaccine for the entire season. Seasonal flu can occur as late as May and generally peaks in January or February. Even a late vaccination can provide some protection; however, it is best to get it before December.

Who should get the seasonal flu vaccine?

Everyone age 6 months and older should receive the seasonal flu vaccine each flu season. However, those people in the following groups are especially at risk for developing flu related complications:

Pregnant women • Children younger than 5, especially if younger than 2 • Anyone with a chronic medical condition • Nursing home or long-term care residents • People 50 and older • Healthcare workers • Household contacts of persons at high risk for flu complications • Household contacts and caregivers to children less than 6 months of age

Can I still get sick with flu-like symptoms even though I got the flu vaccine this year?

Yes. There are several reasons why someone might get flu-like symptoms even after they have been vaccinated against the flu.

- 1) People may be exposed to an influenza virus shortly before getting vaccinated or during the two – week period that it takes the body to gain protection after getting vaccinated. This exposure may result in a person becoming ill with flu before the vaccine begins to protect them.
- 2) People may become ill from other (non-flu) viruses that circulate during the flu season, which can also cause flu-like symptoms (such as rhinovirus).
- 3) Unfortunately, some people can remain unprotected from flu despite getting the vaccine. This is more likely to occur among people that have weakened immune systems, including the elderly, because their body is unable to produce enough antibodies. However, those antibodies that are produced help prevent flu complications.
- 4) A person may be exposed to an influenza virus that is not included in the seasonal flu vaccine. There are many different influenza viruses that circulate every year. The seasonal flu vaccine protects against the 3 viruses that research suggests will be the most common for that flu season.

If I received a seasonal flu vaccine or an H1N1 flu vaccine last year, do I still need to get the seasonal flu vaccine this year?

Yes. The seasonal flu vaccine this year protects against the 2009 H1N1 virus as well as two other viruses. Flu viruses change from year to year, which means two things:

- 1) You can get the flu more than once during your lifetime. The immunity (natural protection that occurs after a person has had the disease) that is built up from having the flu only protects you from one virus strain. New strains may circulate every year.
- 2) A vaccine made last year may not protect you from the new strains circulating this year.

Who should receive a second dose?

All children 6 months of age through 8 years of age are recommended to receive 2 doses of 2010-11 seasonal flu vaccine if:

- 1) The child did not receive any 2009 H1N1 vaccine (flu shot or FluMist) last flu season OR
- 2) The child has never received a seasonal flu vaccination (flu shot or FluMist) OR
- 3) Last year was the first year the child received a seasonal flu vaccine (flu shot or FluMist) **AND** did not receive a recommended second dose.

The second dose should be given 4 or more weeks later in order to be protected.

What is the Fluzone High-Dose vaccine and who is eligible to receive it?

Fluzone-High Dose vaccine is designed to help create a stronger immune response (help the body produce more antibodies) in people 65 years of age and older. This age group is the hardest hit by influenza because as people age, their immune function decreases, making older adults more susceptible to infections and less responsive to vaccination.

What is thimerosal and is it safe for children and pregnant women to receive an influenza vaccine that contains thimerosal?

Thimerosal is a very effective preservative that has been used since the 1930's to prevent contamination in some multidose vials of vaccines (preservatives are not required for vaccines in single dose vials). Thimerosal contains approximately 49% ethylmercury.

There is no convincing evidence of harm caused by the small amount of thimerosal in vaccines, except for minor effects like swelling and redness at the injection site due to sensitivity to thimerosal. Based on guidelines established by the Food and Drug Administration (FDA), the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and the Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry (ATSDR), no child will receive excessive mercury from childhood vaccines regardless of whether or not their flu shot contains thimerosal as a preservative and a study of 2,000 pregnant women who received the influenza vaccination demonstrated no adverse fetal effects associated with the influenza vaccine.

For more up-to-date information, please check the Harford County Health Department website at www.harfordcountyhealth.com or the CDC website at www.cdc.gov/flu/.